DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 415 987 PS 026 171

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TITLE Kindergarten Language: Rules, Roles, and Themes in the Home Center.
PUB DATE 1996-07-00
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Georgia Council of Teachers of English Summer Conference (GA, July 11-12, 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Language; Kindergarten; *Kindergarten Children; Language Acquisition; *Language Skills; Language Usage; Learning Centers (Classroom); *Pretend Play; Primary Education; Role Playing
IDENTIFIERS Play Learning; Thematic Analysis; Verbal Rules

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study analyzed the language of 24 kindergarten students in the classroom's home center during the first weeks of school. Data were collected through informal interviews with the teacher, audio recordings and field notes taken during observation of children at play in the home center. Analysis of spontaneous conversation began with weekly transcript reviews, and categories were developed and revised. The categories for analysis included rules, roles, and themes of the play because they reflected the repetitious content of the language and the primary foci of play. Findings indicated that children adopted explicit rules such as staying in the first center selected, but also adopted two implicit rules: (1) upon entering the home center, you declare your role or claim a play prop; and (2) helping and cooperating are part of how you play in the home center. Roles assumed by the children were family relationships, dating, occupations, animals, and "beyond experience" roles such as angel or ghost. The theme analysis revealed skills in negotiating for the play theme used, identified conditions for successful negotiation, showed variations in themes by site visit and group composition, and revealed verbal control over threatening themes. The language of mixed-gender play groups was more complex and imaginative than any single-gender group. Groups containing males focused more on danger and death than did all-female groups. Results indicated that the students used language to gain control over danger and death and to express perceptions about family and friends. (KB)

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# Kindergarten Language:
# Rules, Roles and Themes in the Home Center

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Paper Presented to the

Georgia Council of Teachers of English

Summer Conference

July 11-12, 1996

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Running head: KINDERGARTEN LANGUAGE

Abstract

This qualitative study provides an analysis of the language of 24 kindergartners in the home center during the first weeks of school. The categories for analysis include rules, roles, and themes. These topics necessitated the use of social negotiation, dramatic expression, and complex thought. The students used language to gain control over danger and death as well as to express perceptions about family and friends. The study offers insights into social, emotional, and cognitive development as evidenced by the children's ability to use complex language, play out intense emotions, and negotiate themes. Time and gender composition are addressed as variables.

# Kindergarten Language:
# Rules, Roles and Themes in the Home Center

Good teachers know the importance of understanding their students. My purpose in studying kindergartners in the home center was to provide understanding of their language patterns. I hoped that the findings would provide insight into how the children managed language. In addition, I thought perhaps I could find in the data a baseline for understanding the social, emotional, and cognitive development of the students studied.

I cannot claim that my data represent the language concepts of all kindergartners. Indeed the short period that I was in the classroom leaves one to wonder to what extent language patterns of the 24 children studied changed during the school year. The data represent a determined effort to gain understanding of the language patterns of a given group of five-year-olds during their first month of kindergarten. Limitations extend to data analysis also. The lines dividing categories (rules, roles and themes) are fine, particularly in the case of roles and themes, which are interactive.

## Method

I chose a qualitative research approach because my interests in this study paralleled Bogdan and Biklen's (1992) description:

> "Qualitative research has the natural setting as the direct source of data and the researcher is the key instrument. . . Qualitative research is descriptive. . . .Qualitative researchers tend to analyze their data inductively. . .'Meaning' is of essential concern" (pp. 29-32).

My purpose was to inductively analyze and describe the process and meaning of language in the home center, a natural setting for spontaneous conversation among kindergartners.

Creekside Elementary School is located on the west side of a growing community, Lakeland, Texas. Deborah Couch is the Creekside teacher in whose kindergarten classroom this study was conducted. Center time in this classroom occurs twice a day, 9:30-10:00 a.m. and 1:30-2:00 p.m. It was during these times that I observed.

I sat behind a pegboard that separated the computer center from the home center. The pegboard concealed my small audio tape recorder and notepad from view by children in the home center, yet my materials and I were visible from most other parts of the room. I could easily see over the partition, but I did not interact with the children.

## Site Description

Once a settlement of a handful of less-than-prosperous country folks on the fringe of a larger town, Lakeland's population has boomed recently. The 22,000 inhabitants enjoy a variety of lifestyles including country estate and custom home living. At least 44% of the residents have a college education, and median education is 13.2 years. Children attend one of two elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school.

Creekside Elementary is the hub of one of Lakeland's planned residential communities. The school, an eight-year-old brick building, is surrounded by ranch-style brick houses with immaculate lawns, a small frame building that serves as Lakeland's library, a spacious playground, and three portable classrooms. The school serves 799 children in grades

one through five living in the immediate community and two adjacent subdivisions. The families served by Creekside Elementary are primarily middle to upper-middle class economically. Deborah's students are representative of the school's ethnic population: 2 black, 2 Hispanic, and 34 white children.

The Classroom

The kindergarten room's sound-absorbent carpeted walls are decorated with colorful posters and charts. A free-standing chart caddy displays children's names and other printed material for use when the class gathers for large-group experiences. Storage cabinet doors display a list of class rules and red construction paper apples with children's names on them. Other furnishings bear neatly printed labels indicating their name or function. The room has no windows, but it appears spacious and orderly.

Deborah's class of 38 children attends school in 2 shifts of 3 hours each: 8 a.m. to 11 a.m. and 12 p.m. to 3 p.m. The morning and afternoon groups contain 19 students each. During each shift the 19 children are joined by approximately a dozen kindergartners from another class. These temporary classmates arrive at 9:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m., just in time for 30 minutes of playful activities in centers. At 10:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m. the visitors return to their more structured class with another teacher.

The Teacher

Deborah is a Caucasian teacher who was in her third year of teaching at the time of the study. Her hands-on approach is valued by parents, many of whom volunteer to assist her. Deborah knows her own two classes personally. However, in early September she was still learning

the names of the sojourners from other classrooms. The task was difficult, she explained, because "center time is their time, and I don't interact then."

During my visits Deborah usually sat at the teacher's table. She faced the children and appeared to monitor their actions as she glanced up from her record-keeping, planning, or materials-preparation task. I saw her leave the table to guide snack preparation in the cooking center on one occasion. More often, she left her table briefly as needed, typically once during each center time, to redirect behaviors.

The Children

Deborah described both her homeroom students and the visiting kindergartners as being five years old when school began the last week in August. In addition, the children are similar in that they all speak English as their first language. The 24 children I observed were in the home center by choice.

## Procedures

Data Collection

The qualitative approach involved three means of collecting data: informal interviews with the teacher, and audio recordings and field notes taken during observation of children at play in the home center. I transcribed the recordings immediately after leaving the field each day. Although I made complete recordings and field notes, the transcripts reflect the essence rather than the entirety of each observation. I reduced the data by deciding "which conceptual framework, which sites, which research questions, which data collection approaches to choose" (Miles & Huberman, p. 21). More specifically, I focused on spontaneous

conversation in the home center, child behaviors that involved language, and events that included intelligible speech. As categories emerged, they too became instrumental in deciding which speech events to transcribe. Thus the transcripts contain sampled data that I consider relevant to this study rather than all of the consecutive language I heard.

Data Analysis

Analysis began with a weekly transcript review by my colleagues. I considered their comments as I reflected on the data. About midway through the observations, I began to see language patterns. I noted the tentative categories but changed them as more complex patterns became evident. Having the transcripts on computer disk, I typed in a code for each category. Then I used the computer's find, copy, and paste functions to sort the data. The sorted data formed the basis for more categorization. I chose to analyze children's language in terms of rules, roles and themes because these categories reflect the repetitious content of the language as well as the primary focuses of play in the home center.

## Results

Refer to Tables 1 and 2 for an overall picture of the results.

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Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

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Rules

Rules in this study refer to either an "accepted custom or habit" or a "regulation" (Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, 1977, p. 1012). The children tended to overtly defend classroom rules, but they accepted

alternate interpretations of child-initiated customs and habits. Rules that stemmed from the children resemble Shultz's (1979) description: Successful social interaction requires that the child produce forms of behavior "considered appropriate alternatives now, in 'this' social situation . . . All participants must share some rules for . . . making sense. . Rules of this kind are, for the most part, tacit: they are known outside conscious awareness" (p. 154). Staying in the first center you choose, cleaning upafter play, and no-more-than-five-children-to-a-center were explicit rules for these kindergartners, but they adopted two implicit rules:

Rule 1. Upon entering the home center, you declare your role. You say something like, "I'm the teenager." Or you claim a play prop with an announcement. Announcements include "Here's where the baby sits," "Where's the mop so I can mop?" and "I'll have this hat." I heard 6 play-prop announcements and 18 role announcements, all signaling entrance (see Table 2). Children who omitted or delayed their entry announcement either met with conflict, or were forced by their silence to play on the fringe.

Rule 2. Helping and cooperating are part of how you play in the home center. I heard 18 explicit examples and many more implicit illustrations of this rule. To say, then, that I heard 18 cooperative language patterns is actually an understatement because cooperation characterized most of what I saw and heard. The following conversation portrays the extensiveness of cooperation in language and behaviors.

Kate: Pretend I'm a baby now.

Ben: Okay, baby, don't eat those french fries because they're deadly. And get away from this car. . .

Sunni: Is that your baby?

Rachel: Yes.

Sunni: Okay, this one's mine.

Rachel: Everyone be quiet. My baby's going to sleep.

Yvette: We will.

Rachel: (As high chair falls) Will somebody help me?

Yvette: I will.

Rachel: Put it (high chair) at the table. The baby needs to eat.

(Yvette positions chair.)

Yvette: Who ordered lettuce?

Patricia: I did. How 'bout we cut this lettuce 'cause it's so big.

Yvette: Okay, here's a knife. Who ordered a egg?

Rachel: I did.

Yvette: Well, there you go. You have a egg right there, m'am.

The word *okay* was used to signal willingness to cooperate. When used as a question, *okay* generated cooperation 6 times. Ben's question, "You're my girlfriend, okay?" and Kate's response, "Okay," are typical. Similarly, the words *all* and *everyone* elicited cooperation 4 times. Greg, for example, enlisted friends to help him on a rescue mission by asking, "Where's the sister?" Greg replied, "Greg: I don't know. Maybe she's in the deadly hurricane. Let's all go rescue her."

Roles

Roles the children assumed can be grouped as follows: family relationships, dating, occupations, animals, and beyond experience. Family members were mother, dad, sister, big brother, baby, teenager, and old

woman. Dating roles were boyfriend and girlfriend. Occupations were teacher and dog catcher. Animals were dog, cat, and horse. The beyond-experience characters included angel, ghost, and bird-dog. Because roles were subject to change, the number of roles played out, 37, exceeds the number of children observed, 24.

At first glance bird-dog appears to be simply a breed of dog. However, analysis of Kate's language indicates that her perception of bird-dog is a creature beyond experience. Scott saw no reason to correct her perception, but chose rather to repeat the lines she told him to say:

Kate: Pretend I'm a dog now. You opened the gate, and I'm a bulldog. Say you turned me into a bird-dog, but I turned back to a real dog.

Scott: Okay. You're a bird-dog. But look, now you're a real dog again.

Roles were both the outcome of and impetus for play themes. Amy illustrates the play theme having been chosen first. She said, "Pretend the hurricane's over, and I have a date, too." Having changed the theme from dangerous storm to dating, Amy abandoned her former role and became a girlfriend. More often, however, roles contributed to the development of a theme. After the role declaration "I'm the . . . ", came the familiar "Let's pretend . . . " Notice that declaring a role is an implicit rule. Thus the impetus-outcome relationship between roles and themes establishes a fine line between these two categories.

Themes

Themes is by far the most complex and revealing category of language content in this study. Analysis of themes reveals insight into the outcomes of various negotiation strategies, conditions for successful

negotiation, theme variation by site visit and group composition, and verbal control over threatening themes.

Theme Negotiation. The children played out 4 themes, introducing and re-introducing them for a total of 55 negotiations. Eight of the 55 were rejected verbally or ignored. Susan's rejection statements exemplify the most emphatic ones I heard, and Patricia's reaction typifies ignoring:

Brandi: Let me see it (a scarf).

Susan: No.

Brandi: Let me have it to iron it.

Susan: No, I'm tying feet to feet.

Patricia: I ordered soup. Where is it? I need soup.

Having been ignored, Patricia served the pretend soup herself.

Analysis of language that failed to achieve the desired transition to a new theme revealed one consistent characteristic: commands in the absence of story context. Brandi's "Let me see it" command was not introduced as a condition vital to a theme. Even "Let me have it to iron it" failed to work for Brandi because ironing did not fit the current theme or offer a more enticing theme. "Give me something to clean the refrigerator" was ignored for the same reasons. Cleaning the refrigerator did not motivate Brandi's peers with anticipated pleasure in playing out a theme.

Conversely, anticipated action was a condition for successful negotiation. Therefore, the speaker who addressed the entire group and spoke in the voice of a theme-related character achieved results. Kate, for example, spoke in the mother role: "Pretend you think there's really a ghost so you come out and scream. It's at night and you're all asleep."

Other successful commands incorporated inclusive words such as *all* and *everyone* : "Let's all go rescue her," "Pretend (all) you dogs saw the dog catcher," and "Everyone be quiet. My baby's asleep." Such commands usually contained meaningful theme-based references, such as:

Kate: Pretend you turned me into a dog and I ate this poison and fell down dead. You thought I was dead. I ate these roots and you think I'm dead, but it wasn't poison. You call, "Emily" 'cause that's my pretend name, and you come in my room." (Falls to the floor.)

Rob: Emily. Oh, no, she's dead! (To Kate) Well, lie down if you're dead.

The ability to verbalize and incorporate subthemes contributed to successful theme negotiation. Kate and Ben's dialogue exemplifies this condition for success:

Ben: Come here out of that hurricane.

Kate: Okay, but pretend you told me a thousand times not to touch the oven but I did anyway.

Ben: I said, "Get away from that oven." We've got to get out of this hurricane.

Posing questions and issuing invitations also encouraged interaction and thematic play. These questions included "Where are you going?" "Who ordered French toast?" and "Did you kill our baby?" A simple "Let's do it again" sustained Justin and Trevor's eat-and-die theme for 20 minutes. By substituting other words for *French toast*, Yvette found that asking "Who ordered....?" repeatedly could prolong her theme.

Introduction or re-introduction of a theme succeeded 35 out of 55 times without opposition. Negotiation became necessary 12 times. In

both introduction and negotiation the speaker met with success when employing at least one of the following strategies: proposing within a meaningful context; choosing inviting, active words; including everyone in the center; presenting the theme with enticing description; using language to offer subthemes; posing other-directed questions; and suggesting repetition. None of these conditions was more successful than another. Rather each had its unique appeal.

When conflicting opinions arose, a particular negotiation called forth its singular strategy. Using the words *please* and *okay* benefited Kate:

Kate: You two boys have to come to my party, okay? And you (Ben) are my date, okay?

Ben: Okay, but I have to stay here first.

Kate: But you have to come, pleeeease.

Ben: First?

Kate: Yes.

Ben: Okay.

Modifying ideas sometimes made theme negotiation successful. Rob and Kate illustrate:

Rob: I'll go to the door and kill him (the ghost). Roar, roar... (To Kate) Pretend I killed you.

Kate: No, I never get killed.

Rob: Well, pretend I got you back to sleep, okay?

Kate: Okay, and pretend I'm a witch.

Rob: No.

Kate: Well, pretend when I got up I turned old.

Rob: You're real old.

Seth: She's old. She's old. Oh, no, my sweetie's old.

Theme Variation and Control. Four themes surfaced during my observations, with danger and death being portrayed in all 6 site visits; friendships, in 3 visits; family, in 3 visits; and dating, in 1 visit.

Ways of playing out the danger and death theme varied by site visit and group composition. Two boys played in the home center during my first visit. They maintained the danger and death theme throughout center time. Boisterous laughter accompanied their guttural sounds as they ignited imaginary fireworks, put out fires, gobbled food and furniture, and flung their "dead" bodies onto the floor repeatedly. The boys' short, simple sentences appeared secondary to the physical drama.

Three girls and two boys chose the home center during my second visit. Their play was intense and fully focused on danger and death, primarily in a storm setting. The teacher said she had not mentioned a recent hurricane in class, yet the group played deadly hurricane with seriousness. They verbalized reasons for taking safety precautions without delay. Every theme negotiation brought them back to the hurricane. Play was equally verbal and physical.

The storm idea appeared only briefly during the third site visit. The four girls in the home center spent most of their time playing friends cooking, serving, and eating food. They moved about less than the previous groups, an Patricia sang nearly half of her dialogue. The group's danger and death references were limited to "Pretend your husband died" and

"There's no door because the storm blew it away." These comments came near the end of the play period, leaving no time for expanding upon them.

Three girls and two boys played in the home center during my fourth visit. Their play theme was entirely danger and death in the form of dogs attacking the baby, a burglar being poisoned, and talk about ghosts and a witch. The stepmother's intentionally burning the child with an iron exemplifies their imaginative language content and physical action.

Visit five gave me the opportunity to observe five girls. The only real dispute arose during this play period. The word *pretend*, spoken frequently in the other groups, was never used here. No one offered a play theme beyond "You be the mom" and "We need some dogs." The girls appeared to be more interested in a faded scarf than in playing out a theme. They talked about who would have the scarf next, what could be done with the scarf, and the group-size rule. Every time a theme was suggested, competition among the group members defeated it.

The two boys and three girls who came to the home center during my final visit brought with them words that elicited cooperation: *okay? pretend*, and *let's* . They negotiated and expanded upon ideas involving danger and death. The result was that for 30 minutes dogs killed people, and the dog catchers killed dogs. There was talk about the dog catchers keeping the bulldog family for experimental purposes. The sentences I heard were long and complex, containing four-syllable words at times.

The language of the mixed-gender afternoon play groups was more complex and imaginative than was any single-gender group. The all-female morning group of four spoke and moved least. The all-female morning

group of five argued most and was the only group failing to sustain a theme past one minute. The all-male morning group used the loudest language, spoke the simplest sentences, and was the most physical. The three mixed-gender afternoon groups and the all-male morning group focused more on danger and death than did the two all-female morning groups (see Figure 3).

It was the afternoon group, therefore, who sought to control danger and death verbally. Greg announced that he knew a secret passageway away from the deadly hurricane. Kate claimed to have found the deadly hurricane and thrown it out. She also boasted that she had a ghost snapper. Amy coped with the storm by saying, "Pretend the hurricane's over and I have a date." Rob declared, "I'll go to the door and kill him (the ghost)," followed by a string of roars.

## Conclusion

A qualitative approach limits conclusions to the children observed. However, these results provide insight into the meaning of 24 young children's language. The nature of language in the home center was more complex than anticipated; similarly, play themes were more intense and fully developed. Therefore, the study offered insights into social, emotional, and cognitive development as evidenced by the children's ability to use complex language, play out intense emotions, and negotiate themes.

The extent of cooperative behavior in the home center early in the school year is noteworthy. These children had been together about two weeks when I arrived at the site. They had already learned to use language to facilitate cooperative relationships. In addition, the kindergartners'

language reflects a respect for rules. This respect is in keeping with Vygotsky's (1978) belief that play involves rules stemming from the fantasy situation.

I believe the roles and themes examined here to be therapeutic for the five-year-olds I studied. Deborah reported that her students said nothing about the hurricane outside the home center. Perhaps their fear of the storm was so great that they could talk about it only in the context of dramatic play. The children seem to have conducted their own play therapy, with their themes and entry announcements paralleling three of Garvey's (1984) negotiation statements: defining the situation, assigning props, and assigning roles.

The children who chose not to play out danger and death reflected Garvey's (1984) descriptors also. Language enabled these kindergartners to define their concepts and values about friends and family. According to Corsaro (1985), their play was "a reproduction (of the adult world) within peer culture. In this process of reproduction, children (came) to more firmly grasp, refine, and extend features of the adult world in the creation of their own peer world" (p. 61-62).

Within the peer world, successful negotiators made proposals within a meaningful context; chose inviting, active words; included everyone in the center; presented the theme with enticing description; offered subthemes; posed other-directed questions; and suggested repetition. The desire for controlled repetition may have its roots in children's fondness of ritual (Corsaro, 1985; Garvey, 1977).

Implications

Because the language of the mixed-gender afternoon play groups was more complex and imaginative than that of any single-gender group, children's language skills may benefit from mixed-gender grouping. Play periods of longer than 30 minutes may encourage both girls and boys to develop play themes more extensively. It is through language and interaction that children construct their social world (Corsaro, 1985). Therefore, all children need opportunities to talk and play with peers.

Political and education leaders currently assert that society needs citizens who can think creatively, work cooperatively, and solve problems. The children I observed practiced all three of those skills. If we are to teach skills rather than rote knowledge as Glasser (1992) advocates, then young children need opportunities to play together physically and verbally.

This study leaves unanswered questions. Why did the all-female morning group of four speak and move least? Why did the all-female morning group of five argue and fail to sustain a theme for more than one minute? Why did the all-male morning group use loud language, speak in simple sentences, and display more physical action? Do most all-female groups focus on relationship themes more than on danger and death? If so, why? These questions invite further qualitative research.

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Table 1

Language Categories: Rules, Roles and Themes

| Rules | Roles | Themes |
|---|---|---|
| Teacher's | Family members | Danger |
| Children's | Daters | Death |
| | Occupations | Family |
| | Teacher | Friends |
| | Dog catcher | |
| | Animals | |
| | Dog | |
| | Cat | |
| | Horse | |
| | Beyond experience | |
| | Angel | |
| | Ghost | |
| | Bird-dog | |

Table 2

Category Analysis

| Observation No. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Time of day | a.m. | p.m. | a.m. | p.m. | a.m. | p.m. |
| Gender | 2 Boys | 2 Boys | - | 3 Boys | - | 2 Boys |
| | 3 Girls | 3 Girls | 4 Girls | 2 Girls | 5 Girls | 3 Girls |
| Rules | | | | | | |
| Classroom | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| Children's | | | | | | |
| About props | 2 | - | 4 | - | - | - |
| About roles | - | 5 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 4 |
| Cooperation | 1 | 3 | 5 | 3 | 2 | 4 |
| Roles | | | | | | |
| Family | 2 | 5 | 2 | 3 | 5 | 3 |
| Dater | - | 2 | - | - | - | - |
| Occupations | - | - | - | 1 | - | 1 |
| Animals | 1 | - | - | 4 | 1 | 2 |
| Beyond experience | - | - | - | 3 | - | 1 |
| Themes | | | | | | |
| Danger | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | - | 1 |
| Death | 1 | 1 | - | 1 | - | 1 |
| Family | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Friends | - | 1 | - | - | - | 1 |

Table 3

Time and Gender Relationships to Theme Choice

| Class | Themes | Gender | Tone |
|---|---|---|---|
| Morning | Danger & Death | 2 Boys | Loud, Simple |
| Afternoon | Danger & Death | 3 Girls, 2 Boys | Complex |
| Morning | Friends | 4 Girls | Quiet, Still |
| Afternoon | Danger & Death | 3 Girls, 2 Boys | Complex |
| Morning | No theme emerged | 5 Girls | Argumentative |
| Afternoon | Danger & Death | 3 Girls, 2 Boys | Complex |